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Science and the Rise of Millennium Spirituality

Part I: The Challenge for Traditional Religion

*A Report by
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June 2015*

To the President of the John E. Fetzer Institute

and

To the Trustees of the John E. Fetzer Institute and of
the John E. Fetzer Memorial Trust

Acknowledgments and Introductory Remarks

Given the scope of the present analysis, this report draws heavily in its construction on the logic, the concepts, and the resource materials, I have researched for a book project on the same topic during the last several years. Importantly, I want to acknowledge Trustees for sharing with me knowledge and resources such as in the form of book recommendations, personal conversations, specific presentations, and quotations, which have strongly influenced the preparation of the report. Specifically, as much as possible, I have sought to link the topics here discussed with the wisdom, thinking, and information, conveyed to me by:

Bob Boisture ("The Coming Interspiritual Age" by Johnson and Ord),
 Rob Lehman ("The Idea of the Holy" by Otto)
 Carolyn Brown ("Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism" by Griffin)
 Bruce Carlson (Personal conversations on the nature of science)
 Lynne Twist ("Pachamama Alliance" Presentation)
 Frances Vaughan ("The World's Great Wisdom Traditions" by Walsh)

Bruce Fetzer ("The Mystic Heart" by Teasdale; and many new research materials for this report)
 Lou Leeburg (from "America's Agony": future spirituality will be "participatory, not authoritative".)
 Tom Beaver (Archival work and his many writings on John Fetzer's visions)
 Mike Gergely (Personal conversation on Intelligent Design)
 Jeremy Waletzky (Personal conversations on the future of science and spirituality)

The purpose of this report is not "to change any minds" about known positions or views, but to deliver a plausible roadmap, a map of concepts, ideas, and facts, for navigating the often difficult territory that lies ahead for us. Our task of articulating a new cultural narrative requires us to reach out to many different communities working towards a positive future for humankind. We will often encounter multiple, apparently opposing, views on metaphysical as well as epistemological issues. For me, the emerging narrative – the new story – is about healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, love, solidarity, and the unfolding of a consciousness-based global spirituality in the third millennium.

It remains to be determined how well this report maps "the real world" as perceived by each Trustee. Every one of us holds a different perspective at times. That is, there cannot be an "objective" point of view but there might be a convergence possible towards an "inter-subjective" trajectory or perspective. Clearly, each of us might have an alternate map in mind when thinking deeply about the reality where science, spirituality, and religion, may intersect. Viewed as a territory to explore, the emerging landscape of global spirituality is often uncharted territory still, with many open patches to be filled in by future research and discussions. Nevertheless, what I intend to offer is a written reference for tackling the often bewildering complexity of the relations between diverse concepts, beliefs, and metaphysical positions. This report may provide a context also for our joint policy discussions about science and legacy.

The central thesis of the report confirms the idea that humankind is experiencing a "consciousness revolution". The word 'revolution' is no overstatement here. We are presently reaching the limits of the familiar paradigm of our existence. The global, informational-interconnected, society that we now represent, as a result of science, is facing a transformation of spirituality in dramatic, and often unpredictable, ways. I will make the case that we are participating in a process whose global dynamics is beyond our present capacity to comprehend fully. Traditional religion offers comfort, guidance, and age-old wisdom to deal with this uncertainty. The ongoing consciousness revolution is marked by an expansion of awareness about new spiritual possibilities for all – in a way that seeks to transcend traditional religious boundaries.

Outline

1. The Vatican on Science and Religion p. 4
2. Morality and the Changing Conditions of Society p. 8
 - 2.1. Morality, Secularity, and Religiosity: A Scientific Comparison p. 9
3. The Rise of Millennium Spirituality p.17
 - 3.1 The Vatican's View of Millennium Spirituality p. 17
4. Research Questions for the Future p.20
5. References p. 22

1. The Vatican on Science and Religion

A new dialogical spirit may transform the traditional relationship between science and religion. To introduce the idea behind this hopeful possibility I will start with a quote by Pope John Paul II.

"Science can purify religion from error and superstition.
Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes.
Each can draw the other into a wider world,
a world in which both can flourish."

Pope John Paul II

John Paul's three-step synthesis towards a new world view sees as integral to complete truth, the compatibility of scientific truth with the truth of religion. I will adopt his three-step approach as a general three-part outline. John Paul knew that the viability of "a world in which both can flourish" depends on whether there exists – in fact – a non-trivial relationship between the two: "religion and science". What the nature might be of that relationship is one key question to explore. Two other questions of great interest are these: If John Paul's vision is viable then what will be the essential elements of the new story? Entering the third millennium, could the new narrative envision a "global spirituality" – one manifesting love and solidarity from the unity of global consciousness?

It will be amply evident after reviewing the next pages that Church leaders are debating the same foundational question as the leaders at the Fetzer Institute. The strategic discussions on spiritual identity, especially in relation to science, have often raised questions equal to those at the Vatican. Significantly, different pontiffs have promoted different views, and sometimes contradictory metaphysical assumptions, concerning the importance of science in the development of Christian doctrine. However, one fact is undeniable: The scientific worldview is increasingly being considered by Church leaders, especially by Pope Francis, in the writing of religious doctrine for the future.

Usually we think of Buddhism or Taoism, that is, of non-theistic religions, when contemplating the possibility of "inner" connections between spirituality and science. However, the last 20 years have seen a fundamental shift in the thinking of Vatican leaders also. Significantly, the Catholic Church seeks to actively meet the challenge – for the Christian faith – of the scientific image of reality. For example, the information technologies as a result of science have created new social opportunities for global learning and communication. For younger generations, such as the millennials, these entirely virtual environments increasingly deliver life satisfaction, moral values, and spiritual meaning. Are there deep metaphysical links – beyond superficial relations – connecting spiritual truth with scientific truth? Remember, for more than 400 years now, the Vatican positioned spirituality and science at the opposite ends in the spectrum of lived human experience: At one end, the "outer truth" of nature by way of science and technology; at the other end of the spectrum, the "inner truth" of God or Spirit by way of spirituality and religion. Can these truths ever be reconciled?

A new form of consciousness is required to fathom the deepest levels where spirituality and science share a single ground of being. Essential answers are still lacking. Our first task will be to identify questions which can give direction to the search for "the wholeness of reality". A good place to start is John Paul's optimistic proposal: What would a "wider world" look like, be like, and feel like, "... a wider world, a world in which both can flourish"? Many believe that John Paul's vision of a "wider world", merging the insight of science with the wisdom of religion, necessitates a "wider" consciousness. For example, a new form of consciousness could emerge based upon freedom, the equality of different perspectives, and upon a new relational ontology of "Inter-Being". In the 21st century, a new dialogue may emerge between spirituality and science, revealing Nature as Sacred.

In the following, I will review information which is relevant to understanding the views of Christian leaders in relation to the challenge – for global society – of the coexistence of religion and science, and in relation to the rise of – what I will call – “millennium spirituality”. For many of us, especially in the US, the challenge posed by science is most visible in the debates regarding (i) the nature of biological evolution (e.g., “Intelligent Design”), (ii) the quest to understand the cosmos as a whole (e.g. “The Big Bang”), and (iii) the “Laws of Nature” in general, and the role they play in revealing the mystery of “consciousness”, the origins of “morality”, and the meaning of “ultimate reality”. As I have indicated above, I will employ the three elements of John Paul’s visionary statement. Part I of the report begins with the key metaphysical assumption stated in the first line of John Paul’s vision for the productive coexistence of science and religion. (Part II will focus on the challenge of spirituality and religion for materialism and modern science based on line two of John Paul’s vision: “Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes”.)

"Science can purify religion from error and superstition."

Pope John Paul II

We have no way to ascertain the full meaning of John Paul’s phrase “error and superstition”, especially in relation to his own Church. But we do know for certain that John Paul defended the right of Christians to think freely and rationally – just like the scientists and philosophers – taking into account the latest scientific findings. After all, he was the Pope who referred to Darwin’s Theory of Evolution as a plausible account of the emergence of complex life forms on Earth. This Pontiff considered evolution to be an “effectively proven fact”. In 1996, John Paul declared that “... new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of the theory.”

Many Christians in Europe have since embraced John Paul’s position on science as a valid means for discovering truth, facts, and theories, about the wondrous world around us. Importantly, Europeans did not experience the intensity of the ideological battle in the US over “Intelligent Design”, which is the idea that only supernatural, divine intervention could explain the formation of the diverse life forms on Earth, from simple bacteria, to mammals, and finally the human body with its complex brain. Clearly, as apparent from John Paul’s own statement on evolution, the idea of “Intelligent Design” was not endorsed by the Vatican during the last 50 years (a notable exception is Pope Benedict XVI). Importantly, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences employs experts who are well informed about major advances in the world of science, and they routinely evaluate new findings and theories. Note also that the Vatican relies on the scientific method to establish the criteria for sainthood; this fact alone implies compatibility between science and the Sacred in the Vatican’s own view. That we now can speak of Saint John Paul is fitting in this context also.

We may never know whether Saint John Paul regarded the teaching in schools of “Intelligent Design” as an act of “superstition” – by those portraying evolution as an unproven hypothesis – or as an act of sincere faith by those promoting “Intelligent Design in praise of God”. It is certain however that John Paul sought to assure Christians of the full integrity of the scientific approach towards answering the question of evolution. Finally, the view that there is nothing inherently immoral about the theory of evolution made it possible for Christians to accept evolution as a valid theory.

John Paul's position of 1996 comes a long way from the previous encyclical by Pope Pius XII entitled "Humani Generis", i.e., the work which presented the Vatican's moral vision for society in the years following World War II. The 1950 encyclical bears the subtitle "Concerning some false opinions which threaten to undermine the foundations of Catholic doctrine". Referring to the spread of world views such as materialism, pantheism, and even socialism in the form of communism, Pope Pius XII denounced the rise of 'moral relativism' among Christians and others. In addition, he criticized the acceptance of world views which were newly emerging at that time such as "theological pacifism and egalitarianism, in which all points of view become equally valid."

Remember the historical context in 1950: Mahatma Gandhi had recently ended British rule by peaceful means, mainly by successfully establishing connections between otherwise vastly different points of view. A group of 53 countries had previously founded the United Nations in San Francisco. This launched the first large-scale global project towards building a peaceful future for all of humankind. The United Nations Charter is founded upon an entirely egalitarian vision of people living together in freedom and peace – independent of nationality, ethnicity, and religious persuasion. Against this backdrop, and in reference to the theory of evolution, Pius XII warned that "Some imprudently and indiscreetly hold that evolution... explains the origins of all things... Communists gladly subscribe to this opinion so that, when the souls of men have been deprived of every idea of a personal God, they may the more efficaciously... propagate their dialectical materialism."

In the 1990s, in the years after the fall of the Berlin wall and of the collapse of the Soviet Union, John Paul allowed for the idea that different ways of knowing, including the different ways offered by science, faith, and reason, could coexist legitimately, i.e., without the immediate danger of moral relativism. I should explain that John Paul's statement on evolution was a direct response to the encyclical by Pius XII of 1950. John Paul reviewed the previous warning by Pius XII that the theory of evolution "... should not be adopted as though it were a certain, proven doctrine". Then, in a groundbreaking step for the Catholic Church, John Paul confirmed that "... almost half a century after the publication of the encyclical, new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis..." (See above for fuller text). Finally, reassuring Christians world-wide, he confirmed that "... there was no opposition between evolution and the doctrine of the faith about man and his vocation." By affirming compatibility between science and faith, John Paul's statement effectively ended the skepticism towards science as a bearer of truth for many Christians, at least in Europe.

 "God is not a magician with a magic wand."

Pope Francis

Recently, Pope Francis has continued in the metaphysical tracks laid down by John Paul. Pope Francis is working towards the goal of diminishing tension between, on the one hand, having sincere faith in God, and, on the other hand, having faith in the truth of science also. For example, Pope Francis appeared before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 2014. In a break with his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, who – unlike John Paul II – was a supporter of 'supernatural creationism' – Pope Francis announced: "God is not a magician with a magic wand." Furthermore, "When we read the account of creation," Francis warned, "[we are] in danger of imagining that God was a magician, complete with a magic wand that can do all things. But he is not."

Remarkably, Pope Francis adopted the (deistic) position that God created life forms at the very beginning but that subsequently God "... let them develop in accordance with the internal laws that he has given to each one." God's "internal laws" are now known to science as the laws described by Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Pope Francis thus agrees with John Paul who, as mentioned before, thought of evolution as an "effectively proven fact". The new Pontiff quickly added that "Evolution in nature is not in contrast with the notion of [divine] creation because creation requires the creation of the beings that evolve".

"The beginning of the world... derives directly from a
supreme principle that creates out of love."

Pope Francis

In addition to his views on God and evolution, Pope Francis shared with the members of the Pontifical Academy, his views on God in relation to modern cosmology. "The Big Bang, that today is considered to be the origin of the world," Pope Francis explained, "does not contradict the creative intervention of God; on the contrary it requires it." Because if God did not participate in the original making of nature – Pope Francis here suggests – then no real meaning could exist; only chaos and blind chance would be ruling the world instead. "The beginning of the world is not the work of chaos... ", Francis thus clarified, "... but it derives directly from a supreme principle that creates out of love".

From the perspective of science, the thinking of the Roman Catholic Church has undergone a dramatic evolution of its own in recent decades. The 21st century image of God, as presented by Pope Francis to the scientists and philosophers of the Academy, tends to assimilate deistic, instead of traditionally theistic, ideals, i.e., ideals that are often prevalent in more educated, even secular, societies: God as a being of truth and ultimate origins, but not God as a supernatural entity intervening, from time to time, in nature and human affairs – with magical powers – to punish or to reward like a "Father figure". Note that deism (Lat. "Deus" for God) is the view that God does not intervene with the functioning of the natural world but rather allows nature herself to function according to "The Laws of Nature". In deism, God created the laws of nature, e.g., the "internal laws" of the "beings that evolve" as Pope Francis had explained. (See also panentheism which similarly rejects the workings of supernatural powers in nature). Again, in deism, as in panentheism, the laws of nature are "The Laws of God".

We live at a time when we can witness the fashioning of a new master narrative by the Vatican: Under Pope Francis, the Vatican avoids confrontation with science and with the evidentiary, empirical approach to discovering how the world works. To the contrary, Francis assures us that the naturalistic world view should be taken seriously because nature herself is the work of God. There are now good indications that the long-awaited "eco"-encyclical by Pope Francis will strongly emphasize this point while arguing that "the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis". In assuming this forward-looking posture, Pope Francis keeps advancing the project of Christian renewal for the new millennium. Already in 1997, John Paul encouraged new thinking among Christians, reminding them, "The truth is that one cannot remain a prisoner of the past".

Clearly, the spiritual project of Pope Francis is "to reform" Catholic doctrine in anticipation of even more dramatic changes in society in coming decades. In October 2014, Pope Francis argued for the renewal of Christian society proclaiming that "God is not afraid of new things!" Importantly, he

suggested that the Church should closely monitor, and be open to adapting its methodology to, the “... changing conditions of society”.

2. Morality and the Changing Conditions of Society

What are “the changing conditions of society” which Pope Francis is referring to? There are many different dimensions to answering this question. First comes to mind the recent controversy over new laws empowering gays and lesbians, including the recent vote in Ireland in strong favor of legalizing “same-sex marriage” (only 38% of voters opposed!). Ireland is one of the most Catholic countries in Europe of course. The Irish vote counts as an indicator of the fast pace of change which can materialize in “collective consciousness”: Only in 1993 was homosexuality even decriminalized in Ireland. Here, however, I want to focus on another dimension: the rapid loss of faith in the “idea of a personal God” – to use the phrase from the papal encyclical of 1950. Where do we stand in 2015?

The US is among the Top Ten nations – out of 57 nations polled – suffering the most rapid decline in “Belief in God” across all sectors of society. In seven short years only, between 2005 and 2012, a drop by 13% for this nation. If this trend continues – even at a far lesser pace – traditional believers could find themselves in the minority by 2030 to 2040. The Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism of WIN-Gallup International found that countries with the fastest declines in religiosity include: Switzerland at No. 2 (-21%), France at No. 3 (-21%), The United States of America at No. 7 (-13%), and Germany at No. 10 (-9%). Remember, all these declines occurred during seven years only! In Europe, this trend away from traditional forms of religion has reached the point where believers – on average across Europe – could be in the minority very soon. Clearly a sea change is coming. There is a new consciousness emerging fast about traditional religious matters. By all indications this no longer will be a traditionally “theistic consciousness” but a new form of “relational consciousness” yet to be discovered. It could be a “cosmo-centric consciousness” founded upon transformational experiences of “the Sense of the Sacred”. We can now better appreciate the motives behind Pope Francis’ proclamation that “God is not afraid of new things” – he is studying the same polls and he knows that his Church must respond quickly. But change is difficult for an institution founded upon an “eternal” narrative as presented in Sacred Scripture.

 “God is not afraid of new things!”

Pope Francis

Only 65% of the general US public still describe themselves as “religious” according to the Pew Research Center/Religion & Ethics survey of 2012. The same survey found that 18% of Americans – across all age groups – view themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” However, that percentage is much higher for the millennials, i.e., for those 18 to 29 years of age: According to a survey by USA Today in 2010, among millennials an astonishing 72% describe themselves as ‘more spiritual than religious’. As will be discussed in Sect. 3 of the report, this “millennial spirituality” can often be identified with self-responsibility, the freedom from top-down authoritarian notions of belief, and participatory and experiential forms of spiritual discovery and formation. There can be no doubt: we now observe a drastic weakening of support for traditional religiosity which is often based on moral authority figures and a set of given beliefs. According to the 2012 Pew Research Center survey, the hard numbers correlate well with the subjective perception also of the general US public: More than 60% agree that “religion as a whole is losing its influence on American life.”

These powerful trends against more traditional religiosity instantly beg the following question: When “religion as a whole is losing its influence” on society, then will morality be negatively influenced also? Religious leaders often argue that only faith in God can provide the foundations for a morally-strong society, e.g., a society that cares for its own weakest members as well as for others beyond its borders. Could this be true? Is there any scientific evidence in support of this familiar religious idea? Are highly secular societies any less caring, or any less moral, than highly religious societies? In short, does ‘secularity’ cause ‘immorality’? Or, as a recent TV documentary put it, “Can one be good without God?”

Let me explain. In March 2015, while travelling the US, I watched a prime-time documentary titled “Atheism – Inside the World of Non-Believers”. The TV program investigated the “second, gentler wave” of atheism, following the first wave of “militant atheism” by Richard Dawkins and followers. Watching the program, I was reminded again of how “competing” spiritual positions can impact very negatively the shaping of human relationships, including between people who are very close to each other. Interviewed was a young man who lives with his religiously-conservative parents. He had told them about his disbelief in the existence of God. Watching him talk, I was persuaded that the son was seeking new spiritual meaning for himself – beyond traditional scripture. Not surprisingly, his announcement devastated family life. About his “atheist son”, the father said in the interview: “It hurts me to talk to a dead person. This is what scripture objectively says. It is an inevitability to go to hell... if you live in sin... by not embracing God.”

Also interviewed by the program was the famous “God-less” Chaplain of Harvard University’s School of Divinity, where he performs regular services based on non-religious spiritual ideals. He explained that American society, like increasingly Western societies in general, has begun the work of “re-defining what it means to be good without God”. He explained that there are now at least one billion non-believers on the planet, and that “Atheists are no longer viewed as devil worshippers”. He continued, “Religious scholars often say that atheism is dangerous to society,” and then asked, “Is this really so?” His question caught my attention. Being the scientist that I am, I decided to look for evidence.

2.1 Morality, Secularity, and Religiosity: A Scientific Comparison

Does scientific evidence exist in support of the idea “that atheism is dangerous to society”? Or more generally: Does secularity undermine morality? Please note that atheism cannot be simply identified with secularism. That is, a secular life choice does not necessarily include an atheistic position, but it may include a non-theistic world view based on the unity of consciousness and a sacred relationship with nature. In any case, one way to begin to address the general question of secularity and morality is to ask whether there can be observed – in a society – a correlation between “a decline in belief in God” and “a rise in immoral behavior”. In the following, I will establish a scientific framework – based on the best available studies – for setting up a baseline for a comparison: How to quantify ‘secularity’? How to measure ‘religiosity’? How to determine ‘morality’? For quantifying the degree of religiosity or secularity of a society, I have chosen a measure which I will call “Having ‘Strong Belief in God’ ”. The information was taken from a University of Chicago study released by Tom W. Smith in 2012. Note that the data for this global survey were originally collected in 2008.

Fig. 1 presents the baseline data on “Strong Belief in God” for 16 different countries. The bars show the percentage of a country’s population who have answered “Yes” to the question: “I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it”. In the present report the focus is on 12 European countries (11 EU nations and Switzerland). Among European nations there is a continuum

ranging from low-belief to high-belief rates. To the left are shown six low-belief countries that have less than or equal to 25% of the population responding “Yes” to the above question: Sweden, Denmark, France, The United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and Switzerland. Next, are shown the four countries between 25 and 50% – Germany, Spain, Italy, and Ireland. Towards the right-hand side, are shown three European nations with high belief scores – Portugal, Cyprus, and Poland. For comparison, also towards the right side, are shown the results for The United States, The State of Israel, as well as for the world’s most religious nation, The Philippines.

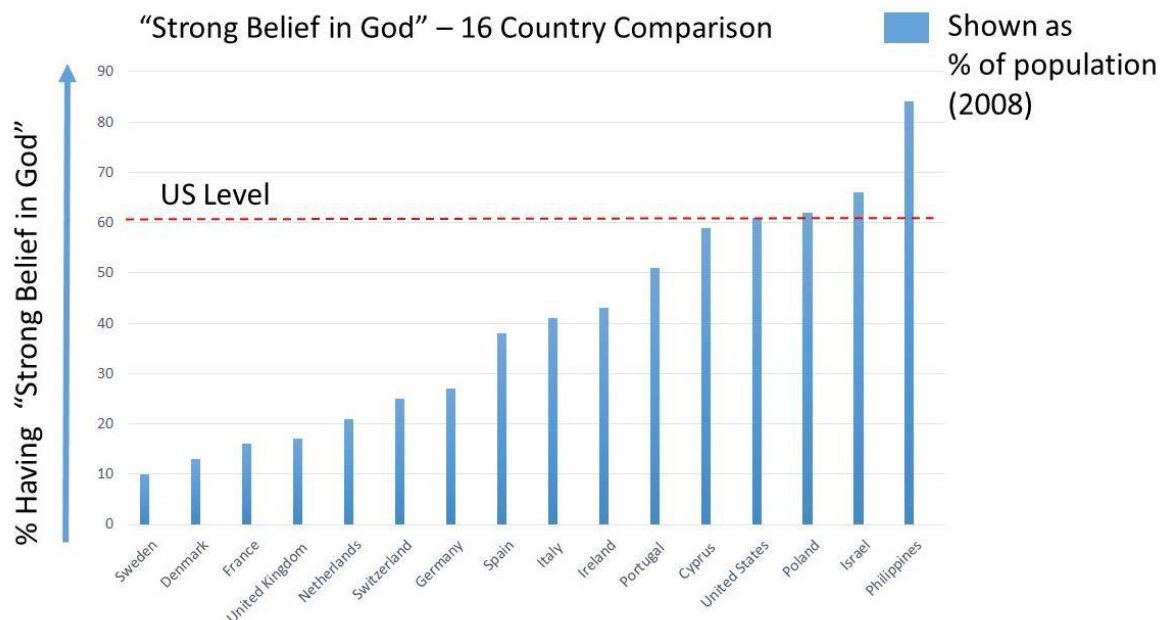


Figure 1: Presented are the baseline data on “Strong Belief in God” for 16 different countries. The bars show the percentage of a country’s population who answer “Yes” to the question: “I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it”. For details see text.

It is particularly noteworthy that Switzerland has recently joined ranks with the most secular nations along with Sweden, Denmark, France, The United Kingdom, and The Netherlands. This is somewhat surprising: Switzerland is considered to be a conservative country when it comes to family values. For example, Switzerland granted to women the right to vote only in 1971. Today, “Non-believers mushroom in Switzerland”, said an article, explaining that “... younger people increasingly can no longer relate to what church authorities are telling them.” At the same time, “those claiming no religious affiliation...”, the article said, “may have simply not found a spiritual outlet among existing faiths.” In any case, as I have mentioned already, Switzerland ranks No. 2 in the world, only after Vietnam, with the fastest drop in religiosity between 2005 and 2012, namely by an incredible decline of 21%. At the same time, Switzerland topped at No. 1 the global ranking of most happy countries in the world, according to the Global Happiness Index published in April 2015 (I will look in more detail at the results of that study later).

To test the validity of the baseline data on “Strong Belief in God” shown in Fig. 1, I consulted a more recent survey also on global religiosity, for comparison, using a second, independent measure. The 2014 survey asked the following question: “Is religion important in your daily life?” As shown below, Fig. 2 jointly displays the two independent data sets. Importantly, together the two sets of data confirmed the general ranking from least religious to most religious countries in Fig. 1. The use of the information shown in Fig. 1 was thus validated as the baseline reference for our subsequent analysis of “morality” in relation to the decline of traditional religion in society.

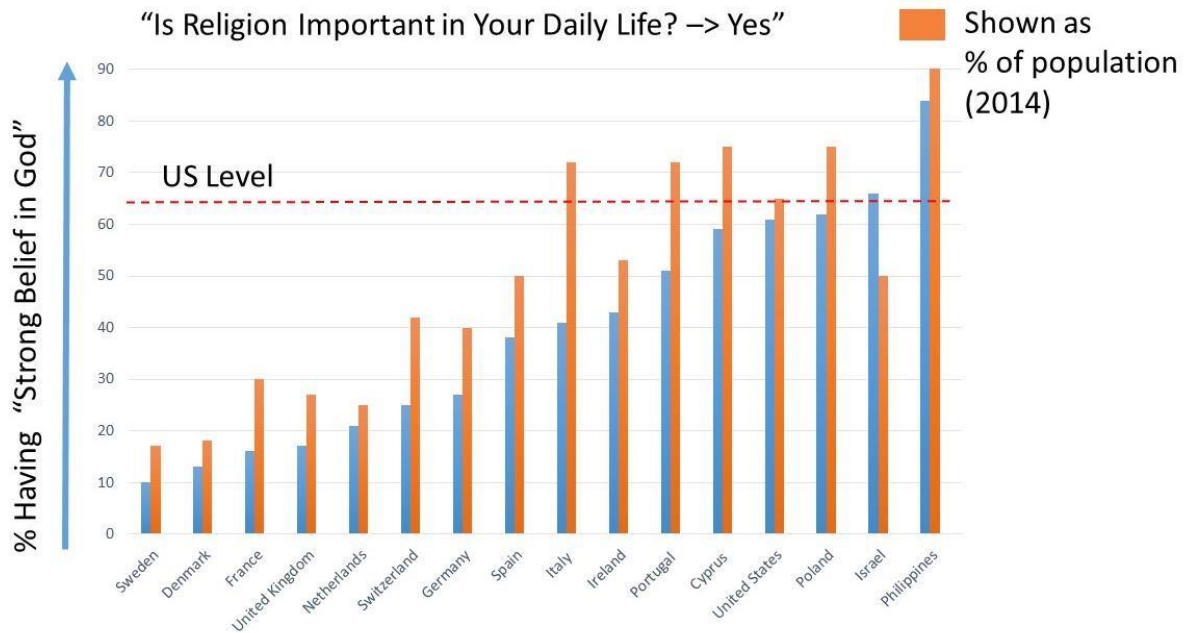


Figure 2: Independent validation of the general ranking from low-belief to high-belief countries. The baseline data from Fig. 1 (see blue bars) are compared to independent data of a 2014 survey on global religiosity. The independent data show the percentage of a country’s population who answer “Yes” to the question: “Is religion important in your daily life?”

Now we are ready for our quantitative comparison of morality, secularity, and religiosity. To see whether there are any correlations between the above measure of “Strong Belief in God” (see Fig. 1) and basic measures which might plausibly relate to the “morality” of a society, I have used three different data sets: (1) Criminal behavior, (2) Family values, and (3) Social caring. Furthermore, I have included two additional data sets which could be relevant for quantifying the positive life experience of a society, and the possible emergence of non-theistic spiritual beliefs: (4) “Quality of Life” measures and (5) a measure of “Millennium Spirituality”.

1. Criminal Behavior
Murder incidence
Rape incidence
Incarceration rates
2. Family Values
Divorce rates
Teenage birth rates
3. Social Caring
Generosity measure
4. Quality of Life
Life satisfaction and meaning-of-life measure
Happiness measure
5. “Millennium Spirituality”
‘Spiritual-but-not-religious’ measure

First, I wanted to know whether there was, in highly secular societies, any weakening of the moral “instinct” to protect life as a function of lacking strong belief in God. I looked at two of the most violent crime scenarios in a society: murder and rape. As is evident from Figs. 3 and 4 below, low societal belief was not correlated with significant increases in the incidence of murder (see Fig. 3) or rape (see Fig. 4).

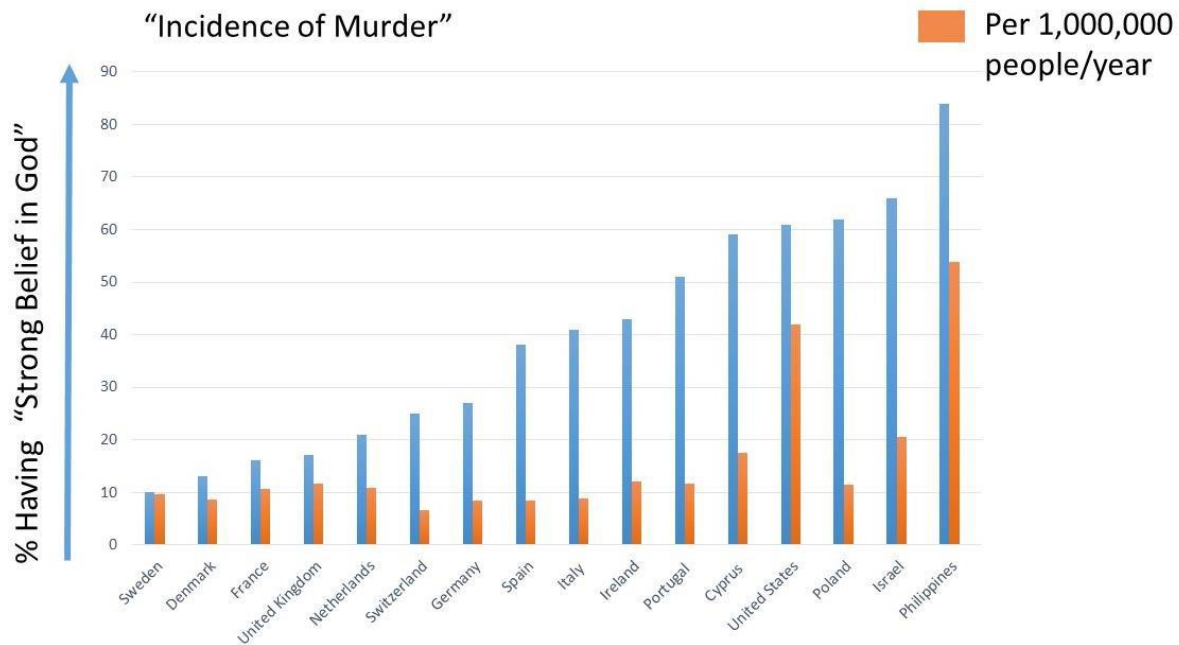


Figure 3: Incidence of Murder per 1,000,000 people per year.

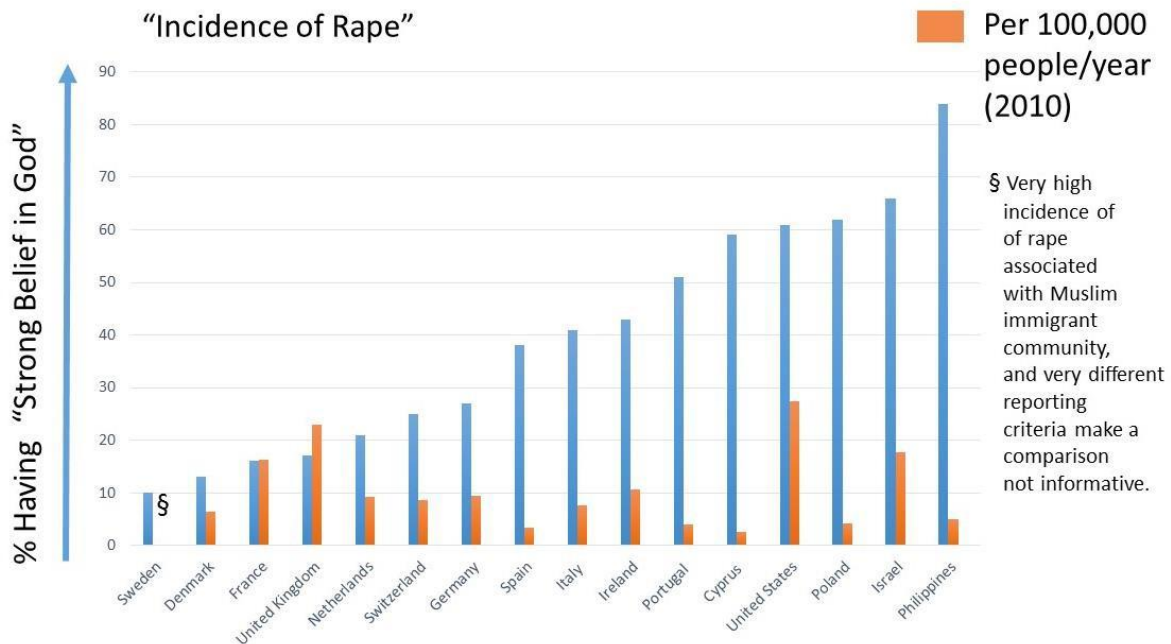


Figure 4: Incidence of Rape per 100,000 people per year.

Next, I looked at basic incarceration rates to see whether there was a general increase in criminal activity leading to imprisonment as a function of secularization of society. Again, I did not find a correlation between low societal belief and increases in incarceration (see Fig. 5).

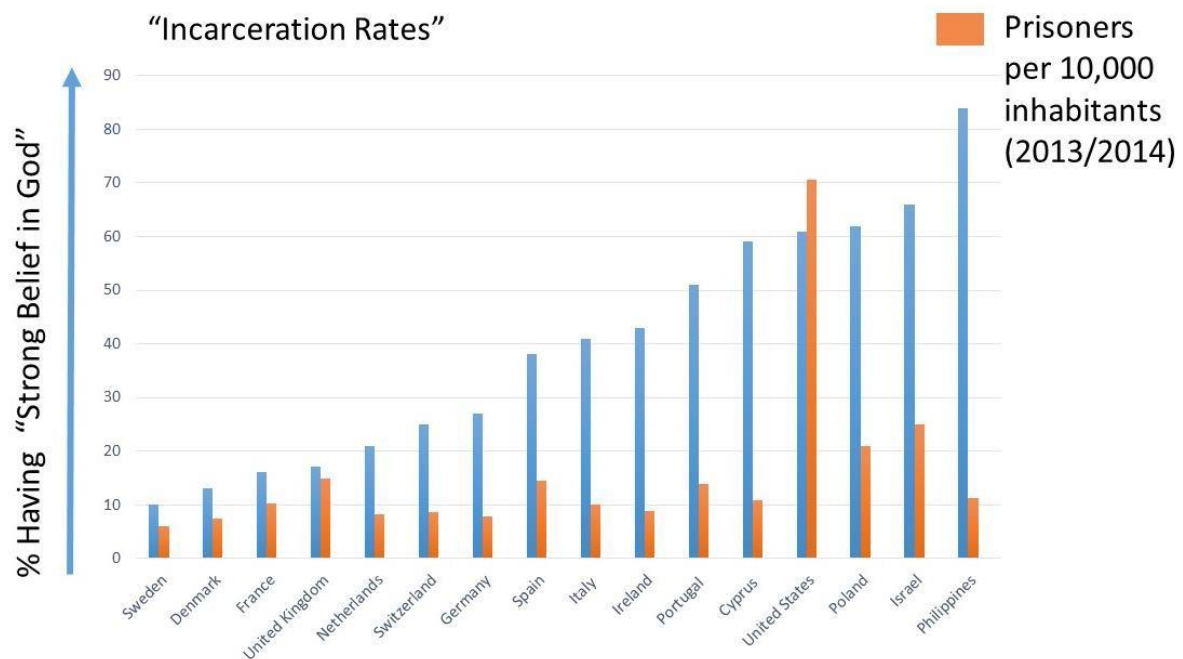


Figure 5: Incarceration rates as expressed by the number of prisoners per 10,000 inhabitants.

Is there evidence that measures which could be related to “family values” are negatively impacted by the loss of belief in God? For this purpose I chose to look at the available data for divorce and teenage birth rates. No clear correlations were apparent between low belief and high divorce rates (see Fig. 6) or high teenage birth rates (see Fig. 7). See below.

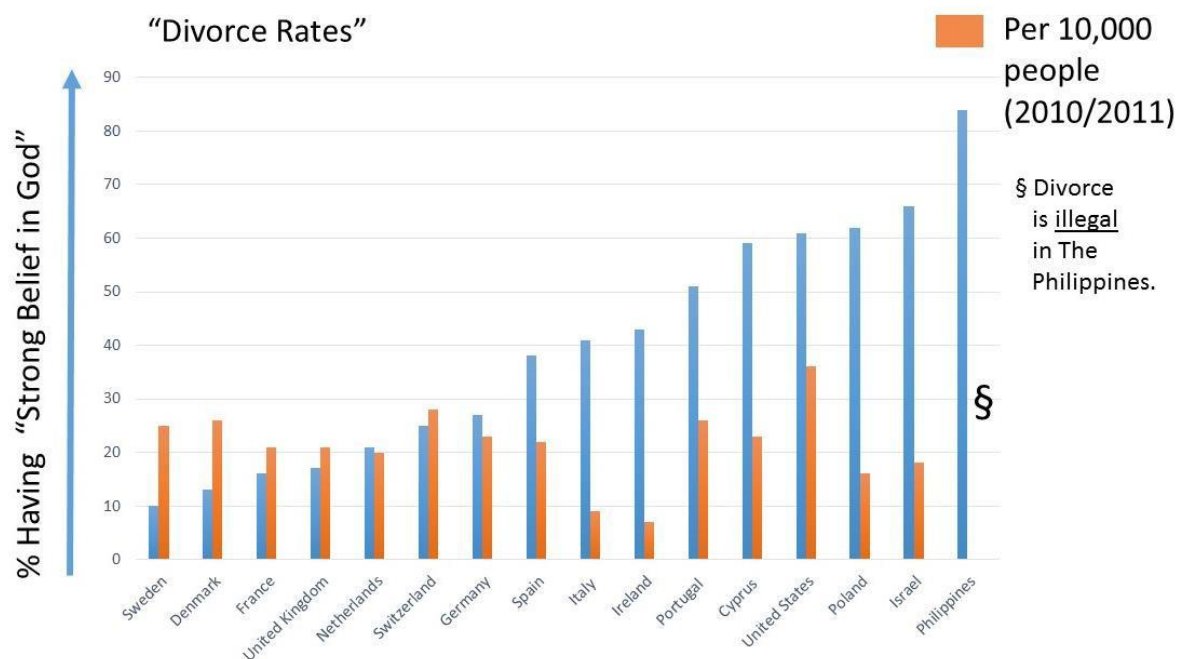


Figure 6: Divorce rates are expressed as the number of divorces per 10,000 people.

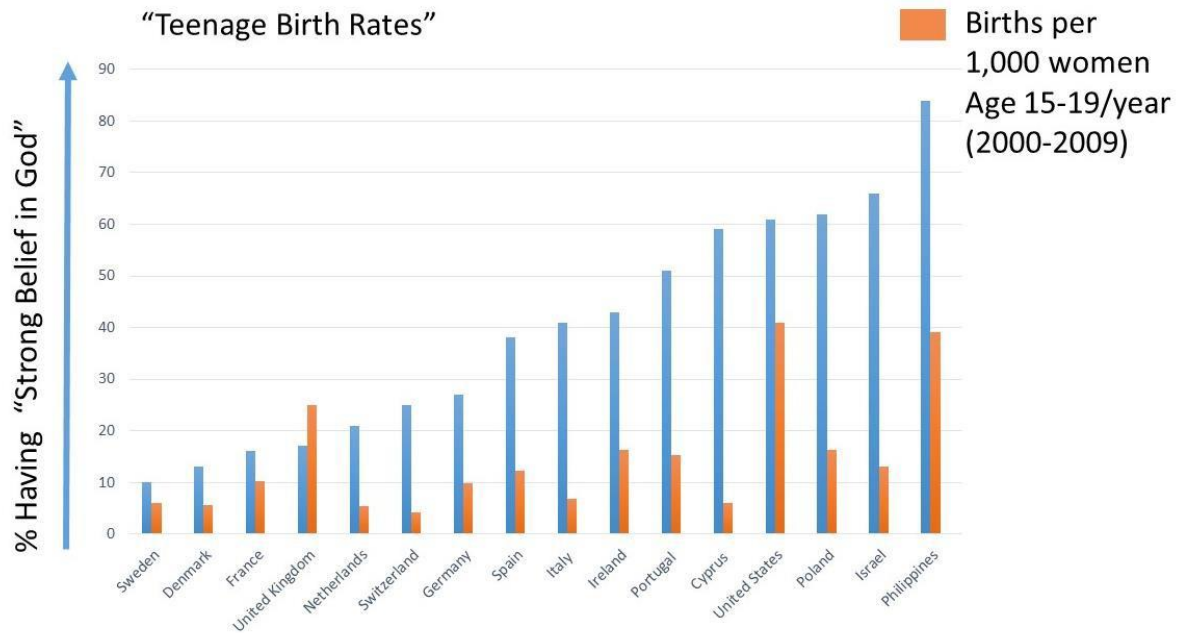


Figure 7: Teenage birth rates are expressed as births per 1,000 women in the age group of 15 to 19.

As a final behavioral outcome, I looked at an indicator for "Social caring" as measured by the "generosity" of a country. Here, generosity was quantified as the percentage of the people of a population who are regularly giving money to charity. There was not a correlation between generosity as a function of societal belief (see Fig. 8).

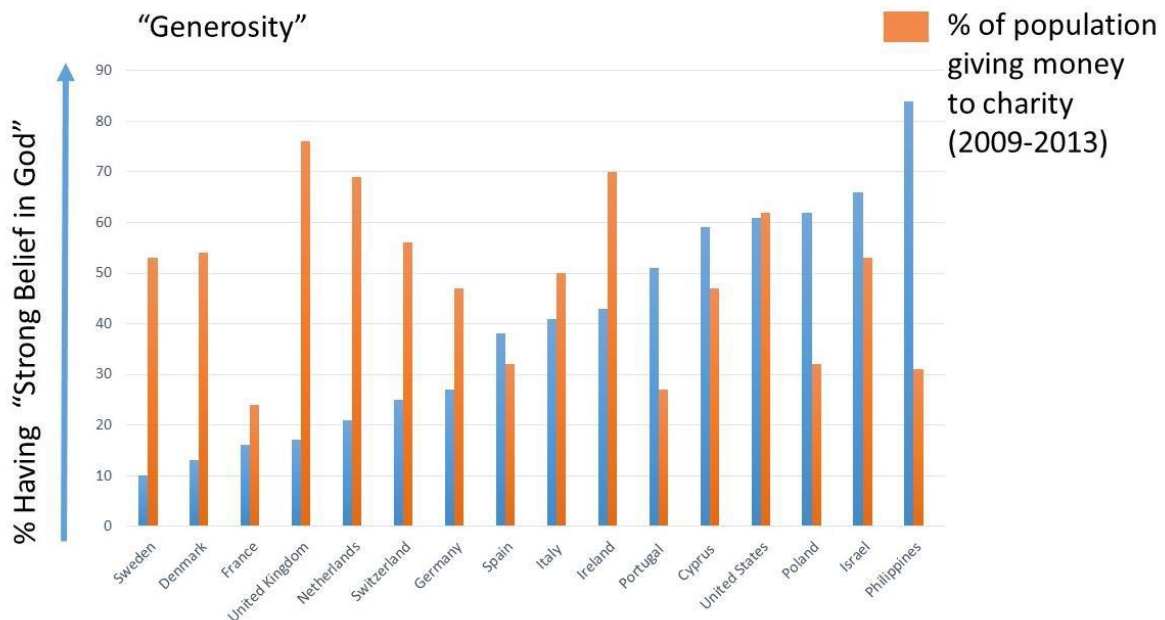


Figure 8: Generosity measure as the percentage of a population giving money to charity.

In summary, the preceding Figs. 3 to 8 reported the data for selected behavioral measures which could be related to morality in the widest possible sense. An adequate marker for moral behavior depends of course on the reader's own views on the nature of morality. The above markers were chosen to contrast the incidence of major detrimental tendencies in highly secular societies when

compared to highly religious societies. However, a contrast did not become evident. Finally, I looked at psychological and spiritual outcome measures. That is, I wanted to know whether countries with lower belief rates would reveal lower life satisfaction or a decline in experiencing life as meaningful.

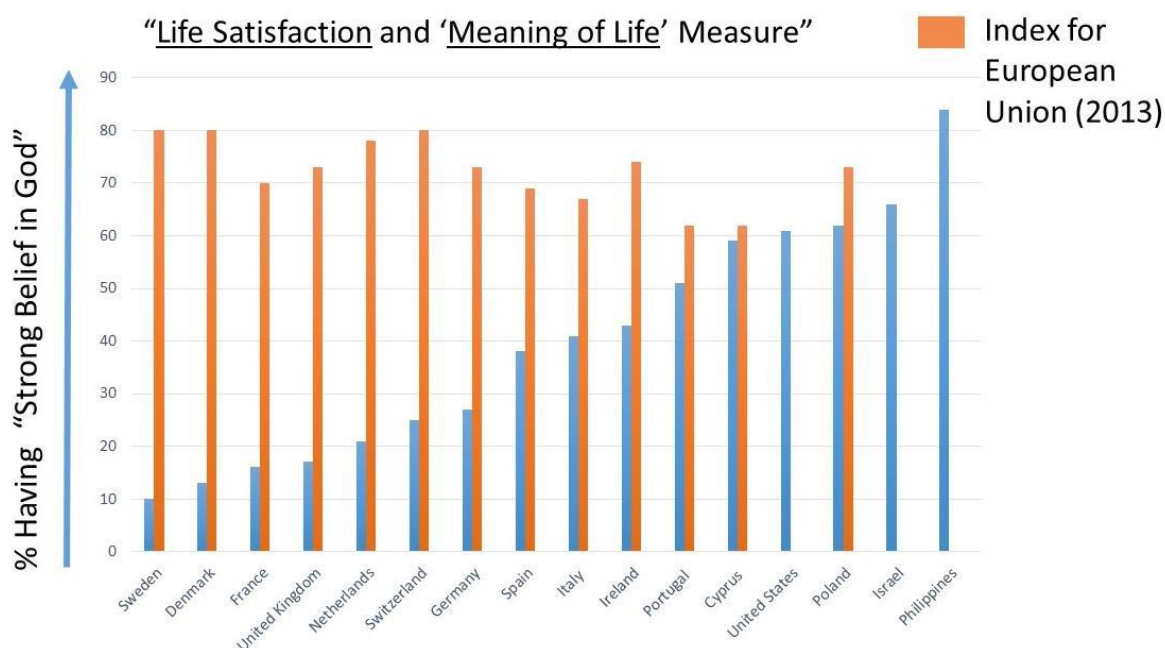


Figure 9: Life satisfaction and Meaning of Life. Shown are data from an index which was calculated from the responses to psychological surveys on life satisfaction and meaning. The higher the bars, the higher the degree of life satisfaction and of experiencing life as meaningful.

Fig. 9 shows no negative association upon comparison of low-belief with high-belief European nations in relation to life satisfaction. Also, the recent results of the 2015 Global Happiness survey suggested no adverse effects on “happiness” as a function of declining religiosity (see Fig. 10 below).

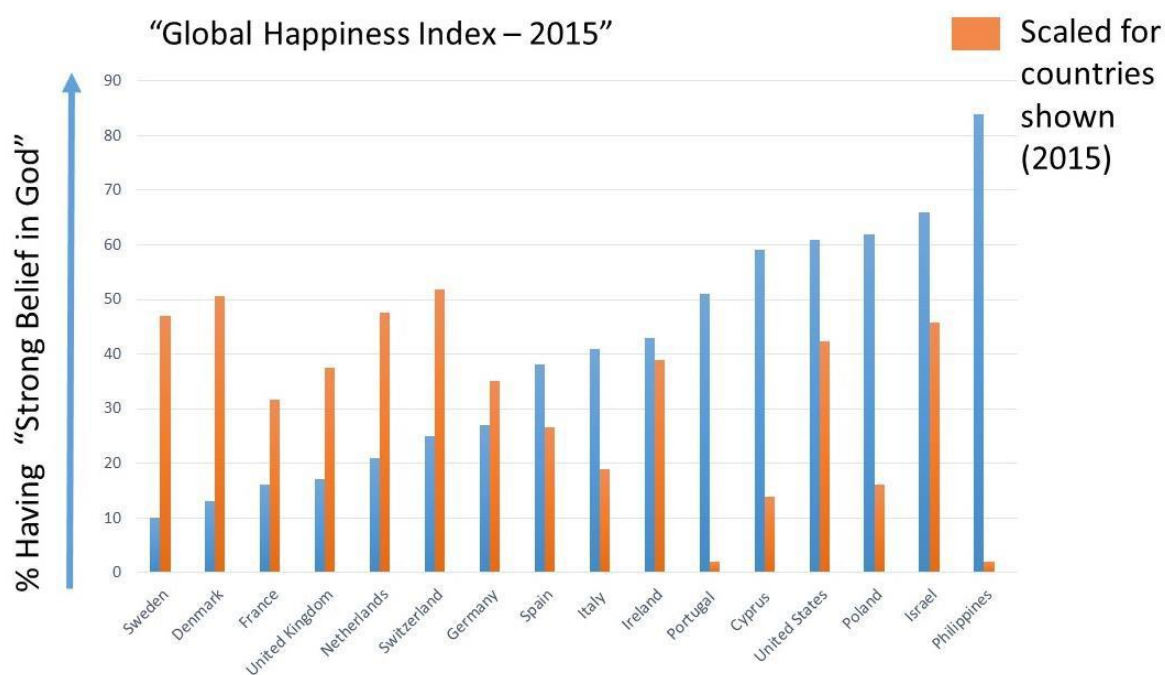


Figure 10: Global Happiness Index. Results shown are scaled for the selected countries.

Finally, I sought to identify a plausible measure for “millennium spirituality”. The EU statistical office released the results of a religiosity survey of EU nations in 2010. The results of the survey found that societies with the lowest percentage of people professing “Strong Belief in God” have the highest percentage – by far – of people answering “Yes” to the question: “Do you believe in a ‘Spirit’ or ‘Life Force’?” The findings are summarized in Fig. 11 next.

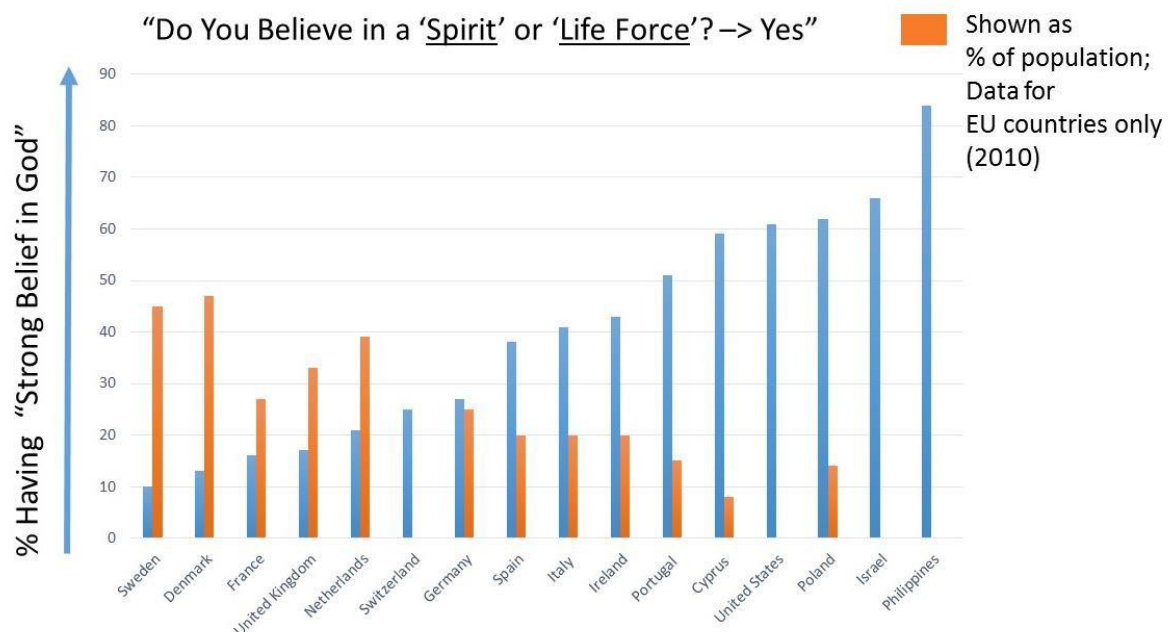


Figure 11: Measuring “Millennium Spirituality”. The bars indicate the percentage of people in a society who answer with “Yes” the following question: “Do you believe in a ‘Spirit’ or ‘Life Force’?”

Among Figs. 3 to 11, the final figure is the only one revealing a definite correlation. There is a clear association visible – for Sweden, Denmark, France, The United Kingdom, and The Netherlands – between low traditional religiosity and high “millennial spirituality”. These countries have two to four times as many believers in a “Spirit” or “Life Force” as those that have a “Strong Belief in God”. Again, Fig. 11 shows that the more secular societies are those that are more inclined to believe in a “Spirit” or “Life Force”. By contrast, the more theistically-religious societies have less prevalence in non-traditional belief (see towards the right of Fig. 11). This latter observation is not surprising. However, the fact that the least theistic nations are also those with the highest belief in a “Spirit” or “Life Force” is noteworthy. For the present report, this correlation serves as an early marker for the rise of millennium spirituality. Are we witnessing the transition from a theistic consciousness of “God as a Father Figure” to a Spirit consciousness of the “unity of all” founded upon the vision of “Spirit as the source of all that exists”? Is this the new story?

A key driver of change for an increasing number of people could be the following fact: The traditional narrative that underlies theistic consciousness no longer provides the kind of deep spiritual fulfillment and the certain meaning for life which it has for previous generations. “I don’t believe in a personal God, as I have problems with his portrayal as a Father figure”, says Austrian musician Hubert von Goisern in an interview I recently read in the in-flight magazine on my way to Egypt. “But equally”, he continued, “I don’t believe that there is nothing apart from us humans here on Earth. For me creation is a miracle.” His view is typical of many people I have talked to. Is this a general trend which might be specific to societies with populations of high socio-economic status as well as of high education and learning opportunities? Many questions are ahead for us to be researched and answered before we can finally establish the essential elements of the new story.

Most importantly, from the perspective of morality, there are no immediate warning signs in the statistical data (compare Figs. 3 to 8) suggesting that those associated with the “newly emerging spiritual consciousness” are any less socially-responsible, any less concerned with the suffering of others, or any less moral in general, than those with traditionally theistic affiliations. Additionally, the measures regarding life satisfaction, meaning of life, and happiness in life, all rank at least as high for “spiritual but not religious” persons as for traditionally religious persons (compare Figs. 9 to 11). Obviously, detailed research is needed to assess the effects of this spiritual transformation on the overall well-being of societies around the world in the medium- and long-term.

3. The Rise of Millennium Spirituality

There is an undeniable, strong trend in the consciousness revolution. A new collective consciousness seeks spiritual fulfillment beyond standard theistic approaches. For example, many countries in Europe have entered a “Post-Christian Era”, not in terms of traditional values but in terms of traditional beliefs (see Fig. 11). We can witness the rise of a new form of spirituality based on practices such as meditation and narratives such as the “Unity of Consciousness” and the “Sacredness of Nature”. Importantly, as indicated by the prior survey data from the US, 18% of the general US population have identified themselves as “spiritual but not religious” also. Furthermore, as was mentioned before, among millennials in the US an impressive 72% describe themselves as ‘more spiritual than religious’. Again, it remains to be determined by a future “spiritual-psycho-social” research initiative what the exact reasons and motives are for this dramatic turn-around in religious consciousness.

The new story of 21st century spirituality may have truly global implications. What is this millennium spirituality? Where will it take us? It will be obvious to the reader that what I have called “millennium spirituality” closely resembles “New Age Spirituality”, or with what Brother Teasdale has called “Inter-Spirituality” also. Teasdale had employed the term interspirituality to capture the fact that “inner” self-exploration, including the possibility of the self-transcendence of one’s “ego”, opens up the possibility of advancing a unifying spiritual consciousness, one capable of transcending traditional religious borders. Well-known mentors of Brother Teasdale were interfaith pioneers Father Bede Griffiths and Father Thomas Keating.

Importantly, my use of the term ‘millennium’ spirituality is designed to draw attention to the following scenario for the future: A new global dynamic may emerge as a result of joining the narrative of New Age or Inter-Spirituality with the nearly limitless technological possibilities of the “Digital Revolution” such as the World Wide Web, connecting individuals instantly and globally. How does traditional Western religion, and the Vatican in particular, respond to the challenges for Church and society of the rise of New Age or millennium spirituality?

3.1. The Vatican’s View of Millennium Spirituality

For many Christians, the rapid emergence of millennium spirituality or New Age spirituality, presents a great challenge to traditional faith assumptions. The non-traditional forms of spirituality have long been scrutinized with skepticism by traditional Churches. This is not surprising. The inter-spiritual paradigm calls for efforts to transcend religious boundaries towards a new religious pluralism. Remember the warning by Pope Pius XII in his 1950 encyclical against “theological pacifism”. What is the position of the Vatican on these accelerating trends towards a global, consciousness-based spirituality?

How to reconcile traditional Christian belief with new forms of spirituality? Is a reconciliation even possible? Are we witnessing the divergence of altogether different streams of spiritual consciousness? Or is convergence possible as a function of a new spiritual synthesis? While the same values are shared – love, compassion, solidarity, unity, and peace – often very different metaphysical or cosmological views underpin Christianity when compared, for example, to Buddhism, Taoism, or New Age spirituality. To get better insight into this emerging dynamic among the different spiritual approaches I have relied on the Vatican's own careful work on this problem. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has set up a Working Group on New Religious Movements. The Working Group released its first major report which illustrates the group's thinking on these difficult issues in the year 2003. The discussion below will almost entirely rely on this "Vatican report". Note that the report by the Council was labelled "provisional"; it does not reflect official Church doctrine.

“Even if it can be admitted that New Age religiosity in some ways responds to the legitimate spiritual longing of human nature, it must be acknowledged that its attempts to do so run counter to Christian revelation.”

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

I will provide a brief summary of how the Pontifical Working Group on New Religious Movements understands and interprets, what the Vatican calls, "New Age". I will also briefly review (i) conclusions of the Working Group in relation to New Age spirituality, and (ii) views of the Group concerning the implications of the new spirituality for the future of humankind.

The Vatican report identifies these five "common definitions", for example, of New Age spirituality using the following words:

1. The cosmos is seen as an organic whole.
2. The cosmos is animated by an Energy, which is also identified as the divine soul or Spirit.
3. Humans are capable of ascending to invisible higher spheres.
4. There is held to be a "perennial knowledge" which pre-dates and is superior to all religions and cultures.
5. People follow enlightened masters.

The Vatican report names as the major reason for New Age spirituality "... the rejection of tradition in the form of patriarchal, hierarchical social or ecclesial organization". This rejection, the report argues, then necessarily "...implies the search for an alternative form of society, one that is clearly inspired by the modern notion of Self."

"The response from New Age," due to this search for an alternative, the report states, "is unity through fusion: it claims to reconcile soul and body... spirit and matter... human and divine... religion and science... differences between religions... There is, thus, no more alterity; what is left in human terms is transpersonality." Consequently, the Vatican report notes that "The classic approach in New Age is transpersonal psychology, whose main concepts are the Universal Mind, the Higher Self, the collective and personal unconscious and the individual ego."

Furthermore, concerning metaphysical assumptions, the report notes also that – in the view of New Age spirituality – “The world itself is divine and it undergoes an evolutionary process which leads from inert matter to ‘higher and perfect consciousness’”. As part of this evolutionary process, “People discover their profound connectedness with the sacred universal force or energy which is the nucleus of all life”, and, the report continues, “The result is a cosmic mysticism based on people’s awareness of a universe burgeoning with dynamic energies.”

At one point the Vatican report presents a short, two-part definition of New Age spirituality: “This spirituality consists of two distinct elements, one metaphysical, and the other psychological.”

Metaphysics: “The metaphysical component comes from New Age’s esoteric and theosophical roots, and is basically a new form of gnosis. Access to the divine is by knowledge of hidden mysteries, in each individual’s search for ‘the real behind what is only apparent... the cosmic divinity beyond incarnate individual’. Esoteric spirituality “is an investigation of Being beyond separateness of beings, a sort of nostalgia for unity”.

Psychology: “The psychological component of [New Age] spirituality comes from the encounter between esoteric culture and psychology. New Age thus becomes an experience of personal psycho-spiritual transformation, seen as analogous to religious experience. For some people this transformation takes the form of a deep mystical experience, after a personal crisis or a lengthy spiritual search. For others it comes from the use of meditation... which alters states of consciousness and provides insight into the unity of reality.”

When the report on New Age spirituality was first presented at a conference in 2003, the Introductory Statement by Cardinal Poupard contained a damning critique of the New Age. For example, the Cardinal proclaimed that “The New Age Movement is both the symptom of a culture in deep crisis and the wrong answer to this situation of cultural crisis, its worries, questions, aspirations and hopes.” He insisted that “The New Age Movement presents... a deceptive response”, and “presents itself as a false utopia in order to respond to the heart’s deep thirst for happiness, which is prey to the tragedy of existence”.

The main conclusions of the (provisional) report itself also criticized New Age spirituality as misguided, and as being incompatible with Christian metaphysics, for example, stating that “The fusion of individuals into the cosmic self... is unacceptable to Christianity.” Furthermore, the report concluded that “Both cosmic unity and reincarnation are irreconcilable with the Christian belief that a human person is a distinct being, who lives one life, for which he or she is fully responsible: this understanding of the person puts into question both responsibility and freedom.” And finally the report warned that in the scenario of New Age spirituality, “Christianity has to be eliminated and give way to a global religion...” Therefore, Christians are “... in a constant state of vigilance, ready for the last days when Christ will come again; their New Age began 2000 years ago, with Christ, who is none other than ‘Jesus of Nazareth’; We live in the last times.” It is all too clear that the reconciliation of traditional with new forms of spiritual consciousness will be difficult. However, this is exactly the kind of challenge which society must face – in a constructive, cross-cultural manner – if love and peace are to manifest on Earth for all people. The Fetzer Institute could be perfectly positioned to lead the way in this essential process of reconciliation in the tradition, for example, of Father Bede Griffiths and Father Thomas Keating.

In their book “The Coming Interspiritual Age”, Johnson and Ord (2012), analyzed the perceived exclusivity of traditional religions and provided a summary of key elements in the search for a new religious pluralism for global society. “Originally world religions based their exclusive viewpoints on a philosophical view called “foundationalism”, which simply meant,” as the authors noted, “that once

you lay down beliefs, all future beliefs are validated by these older, assumed beliefs.” On a more optimistic note, Johnson and Ord suggested that constructive paths towards trans-religious, collective interspirituality are offered by the “.... basic teachings held in common (such as the Golden Rule which occurs at least in 21 world religions), the common ethical foundations taught by all (the message of humanism since the 19th century), and the possibility of a common mystical experience.”

“For human beings, the most daunting challenge is to become fully human.
For to become fully human is to become fully divine.”

Father Thomas Keating

Significantly, the global, cross-cultural vision for the new millennium places severe doubts on the traditional arguments for religious exclusivity. Could there ever be an inclusive spirituality of “Inter-Being”, one lifting borders between different faiths, cultures, and traditions? Critically, shared by all forms of millennium spirituality is the spirit of active discovery and self-exploration of the unity of consciousness which is encountered, for example, in the divine experience of a “Sense of the Sacred”. Finally, the authentic spiritual seeker is transformed by “the spiritual journey of ultimate discovery” itself, and through a “radical and universal exploration”, as Johnson and Ord envision, “into the subtle realms of consciousness and the deepest regions of the heart.”

4. Research Questions for the Future

This report, I believe, describes the prospects for an exciting research agenda for the Fetzer Institute. New findings are sorely needed from scientific research into the spiritual, psychological, and social, dimensions of the ongoing revolution in global consciousness. These findings are needed to help guide the fashioning of the new cultural narrative, and to enable adaptation of the narrative in light of new found scientific information. We are only starting to understand the new global dynamic that is unfolding before us. If my report shows anything, then it shows that we must be open to surprises. Even the Roman Catholic Church is walking a path now with Pope Francis that directly challenges central tenets of Church doctrine from only a few decades ago. Who can know for sure what lies ahead?

“God is not afraid of new things!”

Pope Francis

A new spirit of exploration is palpable in recent announcements by Pope Francis. Change is underway. For example, any discussion of the possible relationship between science and spirituality must first reconsider and probe the question of what we mean by spirituality in the first place. For example, how does millennium spirituality relate to traditional religion? How can inter-spiritual bridges be built most effectively?

Questions such as the above could provide direction to a new spiritual-psycho-social research program at the Fetzer Institute. The launching of an applied science program researching the spiritual-psycho-social dimensions of the global consciousness revolution could ideally complement the Fetzer Franklin Fund's parallel operations on foundations. The Fetzer Franklin Fund mission, goals, and strategies, explore foundational laboratory questions in physics, biological, consciousness, and the foundations of science itself (metascience). Specifically, a well-funded applied science program at the Institute, targeting emerging spiritual trends and its effects on society, could soon make the Fetzer Institute a major player, using science for accelerating positive societal change. For example, potential key audiences such as the millennials could benefit greatly from research into the hidden human potential, mystical experiences, human transformation, and new models for the development of a "Sense of the Sacred".

Behavioral science, for example, can often test the validity of assumptions in society that have never been actually verified. In the following I will list some questions that have come up as part of the writing of this report. These questions can serve as a starting place for discussing future research at the Fetzer Institute.

- If Pope John Paul's vision of the compatibility of science and religion is viable then what need to be the essential elements of the new story? How to determine the viability of his vision?
- What are there deep metaphysical links – beyond superficial relations – connecting spiritual truth with scientific truth? Can these truths ever be reconciled? If so how?
- Entering the third millennium, could the new narrative envision a "global spirituality" – one manifesting love and solidarity from the unity of global consciousness? How could a consciousness be developed that is capable of experiencing unity? Can science play a role?
- Are there any detrimental effects on the morality and well-being of society when traditional religiosity loses its influence? What does it mean "to be good without God"? Will an individual be affected negatively in the long term? How could scientific research shed light on these important spiritual-psycho-social questions?
- Can it be verified that a large-scale transition is underway from theistic consciousness of "God as a Father Figure" to a Spirit consciousness, whereby "Spirit is the source of all that exists"? What are the best qualitative measures towards determining this? How can this transition be tracked quantitatively across different populations?
- What are the exact reasons and motives for this dramatic turn-around in religious consciousness? By understanding better the psycho-social motives of individuals might one be able to design a more effective narrative for the spiritual future of humankind?
- Is millennium spirituality a trend which might be specific only to societies with populations of high socio-economic status as well as high education and learning opportunities? If so, why?
- How does traditional Western religion, and the Vatican in particular, respond to the challenges for Church and society of the rise of New Age or millennium spirituality? What will be the future of this relationship? How to best have a constructive dialogue? What role might science play in this, in particular given the narrative of "Sacred Nature"?

- How to reconcile traditional Christian belief with new forms of spirituality? Is a reconciliation even possible? Are we witnessing the divergence of altogether different streams of spiritual consciousness? Or is convergence possible as a function of a new spiritual synthesis?
- Could there ever be an inclusive spirituality of “Inter-Being”, one lifting borders between different faiths, cultures, and traditions? How could science contribute to the fashioning of a new interspiritual synthesis during the next decades?
- What specific narratives and practices can most effectively shape consciousness towards integration and relationality? Can scientific studies help identify an optimal strategy?

5. References